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Tri-County grant to help improve test scores

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WOOSTER -- Together, county schools will be working to improve scores on the Ohio Achievement Test in social studies through a professional development grant.

The U.S. Department of Education hopes to "make history" with \$116 million in new grants it has awarded to 123 school districts in 38 states for the purpose of improving how American history is taught, according to a July 14 statement by the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan.

The Department of Education documents less than one-fourth of fourth-, eighth- and 12th-grade students are performing at the highest level in the area of U.S. history.

"We're so excited to be one of the recipients of the history grant," Bobbie Singleton, director of curriculum and instruction for Tri-County Educational Service Center, told the Tri-County ESC board of education at its July meeting.

The Tri-County district will receive more than \$900,000 over a three-year period, and, "If we perform well," Singleton said, funding for an additional two years, bringing the total to \$1.6 million.

For middle school students, the state standardized social studies exam has been an "Achilles heel," Singleton said, with some of the scores "barely out of the fifties," against a standard of about 75 percent.

"Part of their non-proficiency," Singleton clarified later, "is the history component for both the fifth- and eighth-grade test."

"That's not just a regional problem," said Tri-County ESC Superintendent Gene Linton. "It's a statewide problem."

State testing in social studies is "one of the biggest problem areas," Singleton said, and is "expected to be majorly revamped."

In some cases, "You're asking (students) to be tested on material they haven't received," board member Jim Butler said.

In answering a question from Butler whether additional staff would be needed to implement the components of the grant, Singleton said, "It's designed to support current teachers."

They'll be sent out into the field to research primary historical sources, with access to archives in museums that include the Ohio Historical Center, and then to create their own programs, according to Singleton.

Professional development will target "content and research-based teaching," the U.S. Department of Education press release said.

Tri-County ESC grants consultant Judy Kestner, who worked to obtain the grant, previously explained applying for grants, such as "Teaching American History," is labor-intensive.

Demonstrating the need for professional development in American history was no exception, requiring a heavy investment in gathering data and other information, according to Kestner.

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